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THE FUTURE OF THE SOVIET ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN: A TRIP REPORT.(U)

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## A RAND NOTE

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THE FUTURE OF THE SOVIET ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN:  
A TRIP REPORT

Francis Fukuyama

September 1980

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Conversations by the author with Pakistani defense and intelligence officials and Afghan exile sources indicated that the Soviet intervention in Afthanistan had reached a military stalemate as a result of Soviet tactics and sensitivity to casualties. Despite the fragmented and primitive nature of the opposition, Moscow has no short-term solution for reversing the deterioration of its local Afghan political base. It has several as yet unexploited military options for breaking the back of tribal resistance, such as a full scale pacification effort, but all would require a substantially higher troop commitment and casualties than the Soviets have a present.

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## A RAND NOTE

### THE FUTURE OF THE SOVIET ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN: A TRIP REPORT

Francis Fukuyama

September 1980

N-1579-RC



PREFACE

This Note records a trip to Pakistan made by the author between May 25 and June 5, 1980. Organization of the visit program was undertaken by the Director of Military Intelligence, Brigadier (now Major General) Mohammed Afzal Khan, and the Military Intelligence Directorate of the Pakistani Army. The program lasted for ten days and included interviews and briefings with an extraordinarily large number of Pakistani Army and Air Force officers, intelligence officials, and civil servants in the foreign ministry.

The program included formal briefings on Afghanistan from the Military Intelligence Directorate and from Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), and interviews with numerous officials concerned with Afghan-related problems. These included the Commander of the 11th Corps headquartered in Peshawar, the Commissioner of Afghan refugees, the Inspector General of the Frontier Corps, the assistant secretary of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), and Lt. Gen. Fazle Haq, Governor of the NWFP.

The provincial government also arranged for a visit to one of the Afghan refugee camps near Peshawar, and to the town of Darra in the Khyber Agency. On the subject of Pakistani security and relations with the United States, the author received an informative briefing from Maj. Gen. Kemal Matin-ud-Din at Joint Staff Headquarters in Rawalpindi, and held additional conversations with the acting Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Akram, Lt. Gen. F. S. Lodi, Commander of the 4th Corps in Lahore, Mr.

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Riaz Piracha in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Mr. Iqbal Bat, the Minister of Information.

The author held private conversations with numerous other Pakistani officers and civilians in the course of several social functions arranged by the Director of Military Intelligence.

This Note deals with the Soviet role in Afghanistan and its probable evolution over the next few years. Pakistani security problems arising out of the Soviet intervention and the future of U.S.-Pakistani relations are dealt with in a companion Rand Note, The Security of Pakistan: A Trip Report (N-1584-RC). Although many of the perceptions and views contained in the present trip report reflect the perspective of the Pakistani military and civil service, every attempt has been made to balance them with what could be learned in conversations and interviews with non-official Pakistanis and other observers, including journalists and U.S. State Department personnel, as well as from the open literature on the subject. In addition, the author had the opportunity to speak with Afghans, in the United States and in Pakistan, who are familiar with the situation in Afghanistan and in the exile community in Peshawar.

This Note is intended to support various subjects concerning Soviet foreign policy and regional security problems. The trip was sponsored by The Rand Corporation out of funds for Rand sponsored Research.



SUMMARY

The war in Afghanistan between the Soviet army and the Afghan rebels, or Mujahedeen, is currently at a stalemate. The Soviets are able to control only those areas where their forces are physically present--the major cities and lines of communications. In the countryside, however, their presence is minimal and they have not had the manpower or the willingness to undertake serious search-and-destroy operations against the rebels. The Mujahedeen, however, can subsist indefinitely in the provinces but are unable militarily to force the Soviets out of their present positions, or even substantially raise the cost of occupying the country.

Soviet operations reflect an apparently great sensitivity to casualties. The Soviets have relied on heavy preparatory fires with airstrikes and artillery and have used mechanized infantry columns to clear lines of communications. They remain quite invulnerable to the Mujahedeen as long as they refuse to dismount from their armored vehicles; this does hamper their ability to search out and destroy the enemy. There has been very little use of dismounted infantry or airborne troops to clear ridges and take the high ground.

The Afghan army has shrunk in size from 120,000 men in 1978 to a current estimated 40-50,000. The rate of defections has been slowed by the assignment of political commissars to the units and through various pay and promotion incentive programs. The Afghan army remains highly unreliable, however, and has been the single most important source of weapons for the Mujahedeen.

The insurgency being carried out by the Afghan tribesmen is extremely primitive. The standard weapon is the .303 Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifle. Automatic weapons and anti-tank grenades are available but are extremely expensive. There is no evidence of the use of portable surface-to-air missiles. Prices of arms in the tribal territories of Pakistan suggest that very few weapons are reaching Afghanistan from outside sources such as China, Egypt, the United States, or Iran.

The Afghan resistance remains tribally organized. Although there are eight identifiable Afghan exile groups based in Peshawar, these control a fairly small number of Mujahedeen and have limited influence within Afghanistan. Several attempts have been made to unify these groups, but almost all have failed as a result of personal, factional, and tribal animosities. There is consequently no political basis for large scale military operations. The decentralized nature of the leadership is, however, compatible with prolonged resistance at the present level.

The Soviets have three basic options in Afghanistan. They can: (1) withdraw from the country immediately or in stages, (2) attempt to break the current military stalemate by substantially increasing their manpower commitment, or (3) hold on to the cities alone with something approximating current troop levels. The first is unlikely because of the highly adverse consequences (from a Soviet point of view) that would follow a withdrawal. The second remains possible but will require a substantial manpower investment that Moscow has heretofore been reluctant to make. The last option is the most probable.

If the Soviets opt for a military solution, they can (1) undertake serious search-and-destroy operations, (2) attempt to interdict the Mujahedeen's external sources of weapons, or (3) begin the systematic destruction of Afghan agriculture to deny the rebels food. Each one of these options will require significantly more manpower than currently deployed in Afghanistan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to pay special thanks to Gen. Mohammed Afzal Khan, the former Director of Military Intelligence of the Pakistani Army, for his help and extraordinary hospitality in organizing the visit program. Gen. F. S. Lodi, Commander of the 4th Corps in Lahore, was very gracious in arranging a visit to that city. Particular thanks are also due Lt. Col. Afzal Khan (no relation) who devoted a great deal of his own time and energy to conducting the author around the country. Finally, the author would like to express his gratitude to all of the other Pakistani officers and civilians, too numerous to name, who contributed their time and views in the course of this trip.

Dr. Bashir Zikria, and the former representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations Dr. Faiz Zikria, provided much help and insight into developments in Afghanistan.

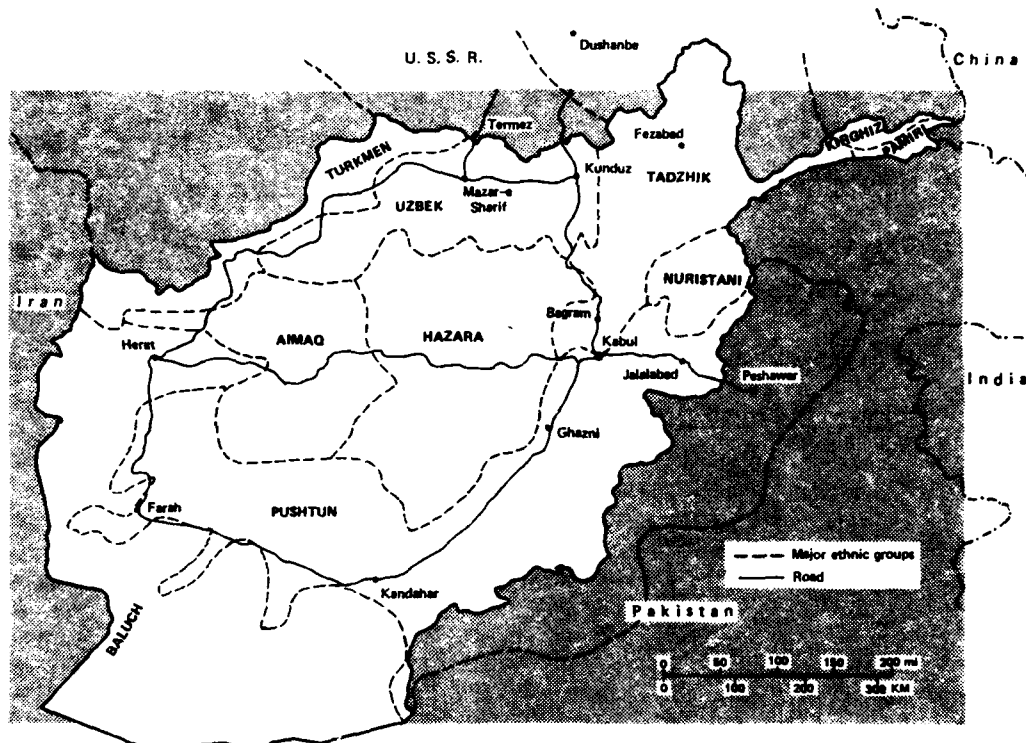
This visit was also greatly facilitated by a number of Americans in the embassy in Islamabad and at the State Department. Ambassador Arthur Hummel, Messrs. Herbert Haggerty, Edric Sherman, Douglas Archard, Mrs. Teresita Schaffer, and the U.S. Defense Attache, Col. William Sullivan, all gave generously of their time.

The author profited from conversations with a number of journalists, several of whom had recently returned from Afghanistan. Edward Girardet of The Christian Science Monitor was particularly helpful in bringing his insights to bear.

Finally, at Rand, the author would like to thank Michael Landi, Richard Solomon, and Enders Wimbush for their help and encouragement in making this trip possible.

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SOURCE: Based on Louis Dupee, *Afghanistan*

## Afghanistan

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Communist takeover in Kabul of April 1978 and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 mark an important turning point in Soviet foreign policy. The former event appeared to fall into a general pattern of greater activism on the part of Third World Communist Parties in the late 1970s,[1] encouraged and abetted by the Soviet Union. The latter move represented the first time that Soviet ground forces had been deployed outside the Warsaw Pact area since World War II. Moscow's forcible replacement of Hafizullah Amin with Babrak Karmal as president of Afghanistan indicated a Soviet willingness to interfere in the internal affairs of a Third World client that had no direct precedent. The Soviets at the same time gained a distinct geopolitical advantage by outflanking Iran and putting the greater part of the Persian Gulf within the range of their tactical airpower.

The Soviet role in Afghanistan is of interest on at least two levels. The first concerns the immediate threat to American interests posed by the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Substantial uncertainties remain as to the level and direction of the Soviet military effort in Afghanistan, and the manner in which it might be broadened to include such other countries as Pakistan and Iran. Insight into these issues depends upon specific knowledge of the current political and military environment in South West Asia. The second level concerns the more

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[1] See F. Fukuyama, "A New Soviet Strategy," Commentary, October 1979.

general lessons that can be drawn from the Soviet intervention. Western observers for the first time have an opportunity to observe modern Soviet ground forces engaged in actual combat operations. Moscow's political strategy may also serve as a point of departure for future Third World interventions.

This trip report attempts to deal with these questions in a preliminary way on the basis of research I conducted during a visit to Pakistan in May and June of 1980. Pakistan has always had very deep historical and cultural ties with the peoples of Afghanistan. Because of the similarity of the populations on either side of the boundary separating the two countries, Pakistanis have a unique interest in and familiarity with developments to the north. This concern has naturally been heightened since Afghanistan, a traditional buffer state, has fallen first under the indirect and then under the direct control of the Soviet Union.

This Note reflects what was in my judgment the best balance of factual information and opinions encountered in the many briefings and interviews that took place during the trip. For several reasons it has not been possible to reference all of the individual sources. The greater part of the information on Soviet operations and deployments came from official Pakistani intelligence sources.

This Note will first describe the tactics and operations of Soviet and loyal Afghan forces as they have evolved through early June 1980. It will then deal with the military characteristics of the tribal insurgency, with particular reference to the rebels' sources of weapons and dependence on outside support. The present political organization



of the insurgency will also be discussed. The final section is an analysis of Soviet options in Afghanistan and their implications for the security of the region.

## II. SOVIET DEPLOYMENTS AND TACTICS

According to Pakistani intelligence sources, Soviet troop strength in Afghanistan has remained stable from a few weeks after the December 27, 1979 intervention up to the time of my visit in late May 1980. This amounted to approximately ten division equivalents: seven motorized rifle divisions, two composite airborne divisions, and four independent motorized rifle regiments. At both Military Intelligence and ISI I was shown maps of the present deployment of these units that revealed no unusual concentrations near either Iran or the Pakistani border.

Soviet forces are based in all the major cities and provincial capitals, as well as around airbases and the important lines of communication. There is a group of three motorized rifle divisions in Kabul and the nearby airbase of Bagram, one airborne division at Jalalabad on the main road to Pakistan, two motorized rifle divisions in the south and southwest of the country along the Pakistani and Iranian borders (in Kandahar, Helmand, Nimruz, and Farah provinces), two motorized rifle divisions in the north and northeast (Balkh, Kunduz, Takhar, Badakhshan provinces) bordering China and the Soviet Union, with the remainder spread elsewhere about the country. The Soviets have conducted particularly heavy operations in the provinces adjoining their own border, apparently for fear of unrest spilling over amongst their own Tazhiks and Uzbeks. The area of weakest Russian control is the Hazarajat, the central highlands containing some of the most magnificent peaks of the Hindu Kush range.

The Soviets and their Afghan collaborators have not been able to establish their military or administrative presence outside of the major cities, and even this has become increasingly insecure, as will be noted below. Soviet attempts to pacify the countryside have been largely restricted to the valleys adjacent to major provincial capitals, such as Kunar and Nangahar, and to the lines of communication physically necessary to support Soviet and loyal Afghan operations. When the Soviets decide to go somewhere, there is little that the Afghan rebels, or Mujahedeen, can do to stop them, but they can exercise their authority only where their troops are physically present.

Soviet military tactics show certain similarities to those of the United States in Vietnam. The Russians have apparently been rather sensitive to casualties and, as a result, have attempted to substitute firepower for manpower. Their well-publicized sweeps through the countryside, such as the one in the Kunar Valley in March 1980, have been preceded by intense air and artillery bombardments against villages and suspected rebel positions. The effectiveness of such measures depends to a great extent on the quality of tactical intelligence, which the Soviets do not have the political infrastructure to obtain. In ground operations Soviet mechanized infantry seldom dismounts from its armored personnel carriers or tanks. MI-24 armored attack helicopters are used solely as a source of firepower, either independently or in conjunction with ground forces, and not to transport airborne units. Finally, in the early phases of the intervention the Soviets avoided using their own troops in combat as far as possible, relying instead on loyal Afghan forces to bear the brunt of the fighting.

These tactics do indeed serve to minimize casualties.[1] Aside from an occasional homemade landmine or Molotov cocktail, there is very little that the Mujahedeen can do to the Russians when they are bottled up in their armored vehicles. There is also very little that the Soviets can do to the Mujahedeen under these conditions. Before any major military operation the rebels will have dispersed, at night, into hundreds of caves or protected firing positions in the hills surrounding the valleys through which the Soviets intend to move. The Soviets have very little to shoot at except for abandoned villages and the noncombatants left behind. The Soviet Army up to this point has not demonstrated a nighttime counterinsurgency capability, and once the unit leaves the countryside the tribesmen reinfiltrate immediately. The war consequently has a spotty, inconsistent character. In some areas there is heavy fighting and the liberal use of firepower, leading to reports that the rebels are being pushed back and demoralized, while in the next

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[1] A useful point of comparison might be made with British military tactics in the tribal areas on the Indian side of the border during the 19th century. The British never succeeded in pacifying the tribes--indeed, they never made a serious attempt to do so--but they did succeed in establishing several important cantonments in the tribal agencies and managed to keep open (in a fashion) lines of communication between them. They were able to achieve even this much only when they learned to clear the ridges overlooking the valleys through which their communications passed, and to post pickets along them. These pickets were, of course, dismounted light infantry who had been specially trained to fight and move like the tribesmen themselves. In order to keep these routes open the pickets had to be maintained more or less permanently. Casualties were extremely high. A single reprisal raid into the tribal territories could at times consume several thousand men, and this was a struggle that continued, year in and year out, for the last century of the British Raj. The Russians could obviously use their airborne forces in this fashion, and could garrison all the major lines of communication as the British did in the northwest frontier. The Soviets would have to accept a substantial increase in the number of casualties, however, and would require many more troops than are currently in the country.

valley there can be complete calm and total rebel control. According to one source, the Mujahedeen were able to overwhelm an isolated Afghan army garrison in a daylight attack, during the large Kunar Valley offensive in March, without so much as a response from nearby Soviet aircraft and artillery.

### III. THE AFGHAN ARMY

The Afghan army at the time of the April 1978 coup was a fairly sizable organization. According to Pakistani intelligence sources, it consisted of the following units:

- 3 Corps Headquarters
- 11 Infantry Divisions
- 3 Armored Divisions
- 3 Mechanized Brigades (independent)
- 3 Commando Battalions
- 1 Parachute Brigade.

As a result of defections and purges, however, the troop strength of the Afghan army has fallen from 120,000 to about 40-50,000. In some cases these losses resulted from defections of entire units, which would turn on their Soviet advisors and leave with all their weapons. Other losses, particularly within the officers' corps, were the result of an internal power struggle within the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The Khalq faction of the party, which initially came to power under the leadership of Nur Mohammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, purged their rivals in the Parcham faction between mid-1978 and late 1979. The Parchamis took their revenge once Babrak Karmal was installed by the Soviets in December 1979. At present all Afghan officers down to the level of brigade commander (colonels and lieutenant colonels) have been completely purged, and major units are now led by younger officers who two years ago were captains and majors. In addition, the regime has tried to tighten its grip on the armed forces by assigning PDPA cadres to all units in the form of political commissars. Demoralization has of course reached an extreme. The

government has tried to replace defections by universal conscription and substantial pay raises, and the officers have been wooed with rapid promotions, particularly on the occasion of the revolution's second anniversary in April 1980.

According to Pakistani intelligence, the Afghan Air Force has been completely taken over by the Soviet frontal aviation units in Afghanistan. A number of Perchami Air Force officers were instrumental in bringing about the April 1978 coup d'etat and were obvious targets in the subsequent purges. All aircraft nominally in the Afghan Air Force inventory are now piloted by Russians.

There was a divergence in the views expressed by different Pakistani officials on the future fighting potential of the Afghan army. One general at the Joint Staff Headquarters ventured the opinion that the defections up till now had stripped the Afghan army of its unreliable elements and that what remained was a leaner but more capable opponent of potentially greater a threat to Pakistan than before. He said that the Soviets were engaged in a massive program to indoctrinate the young Afghan officers being brought up through the ranks, and that in time this would yield a more disciplined and ideologically motivated cadre to control the new Afghan army. The balance of opinion in the Pakistani intelligence community disagreed, however. The prevailing view at Inter Services Intelligence was that what is left of the Afghan army is held together largely by fear. The Soviets and the Afghan government have slowed the rate of defections by watching the remaining units very carefully and not trusting them with missions in which they would be tempted to go over to the other side. Individual soldiers are

kept in line by the political commissars, who see to it that reprisals are taken against the families of defecting conscripts. A project to indoctrinate the Afghan army in Marxist-Leninist ideology is underway, but it would be years before it bears fruit. Until then further defections can be expected, although at a slower rate than before.

The Afghan army's deployments are rather different from those of the Soviet armed forces, being concentrated almost entirely in the southern provinces of Kandahar, Zabol, Ghazni, Paktia, Nangahar, and Kunar along the Pakistani border. This does not reflect a concerted drive on the part of the Afghans to close off infiltration from Pakistan. The Afghan army has traditionally always been deployed along the southern border, and these deployments have not changed since the beginning of the civil war.



#### IV. MUJAHEDeen MILITARY TACTICS

It is difficult to overstate the primitiveness of the insurgency being carried out by the Afghan tribesmen. Almost all transportation is by foot--most Afghans are tremendously fit and can cover an impressive number of miles in mountainous terrain each day. There are stories coming out of the high provinces in the Hazarajat or Badakhshan of tribesmen routinely going barefoot in the snow. Camel and donkey caravans are occasionally used to transport food and weapons, but often the tribesmen will trek several hundred kilometers on foot from the interior of Afghanistan to cross the Pakistani border for supplies.

The standard weapon among the tribesmen in northern Pakistan and southern Afghanistan continues to be the bolt-action .303 Lee-Enfield, which used to be standard issue in the British Army of India. The Enfield is a status weapon of sorts, sought after by young men as a symbol of having reached adulthood. The Soviet Kalashnikov assault rifle in its AK-47 or AKM versions is also highly prized, although its automatic features are probably seldom used because of the extremely high cost of ammunition. Soviet infantrymen have taken to wearing body armor consisting of overlapping nylon plates covering the torso armadillo-fashion. The tribesmen believe, rightly or wrongly, that the Enfield is better able to penetrate this armor at long ranges and is more accurate.

Although the Kalashnikovs are captured, the Enfields are made locally. Darra, a town in the territory of the Adam Khel Afridis that has been the subject of a number of National Geographic style features,

serves as a source of arms for many of the local tribes including those in Afghanistan. The road running through the town is lined with gunsmith shops, generally consisting of a single room with dirt floors open at the front. There are no assembly line methods used here: Each gun is handcrafted piece by piece and may take the gunsmith a week or two to machine and assemble. The workmanship is remarkable. The gunsmiths are able to take virtually any weapon and reproduce it, down to the "Made in England" logo stamped on the barrel. Local materials, however, are highly inadequate. The barrels of some of the Enfields were made out of the steel tubing used to reinforce concrete, which is so soft that it can barely take rifling. Nonetheless, the collection of handmade weapons in the one shop I visited was impressive. In addition to the racks of Enfields, there were numerous Colt and Webber handguns, and the walls were lined with an amazing variety of automatic weapons. The dealer in question also had on sale a variety of heavier Soviet arms captured in Afghanistan, including a Kalashnikov, an RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher, and several landmines.

The lack of availability of these weapons is reflected in their extraordinary cost. The standard Enfield cost 10,000 rupees, or \$1,000; the Kalashnikov sold for about \$2,000, and the grenade launcher cost a staggering \$9,000. One grenade for the RPG-7 was \$700 and a single .303 bullet cost \$2-3. The fact that prices have fluctuated around this level ever since the civil war broke out in 1978[1] suggests that any assistance from outside sources, such as the United States, China, or

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[1] The price of a Kalashnikov, for example, has stayed in the range of \$2000-2400 since 1978.

Egypt, has been minimal. Even at these prices, however, there are buyers: Many of the tribal leaders in the North West Frontier Province and in southern Afghanistan are quite wealthy as a result of their smuggling operations, and often the entire tribe will pool its resources to buy a single anti-tank weapon. Needless to say, the high cost of ammunition necessitates strict fire discipline during engagements.

In the absence of regular sources of modern weapons from the outside, the Afghans have resorted to rather ingenious means of warfare. They fill iron cooking-pots with locally fabricated explosive material for use as makeshift landmines, in addition to traditional Molotov cocktails. There have been reports of tribesmen ambushing tanks by creating rockslides in narrow mountain defiles. Although the Mujahedeen have some successes against tanks and armored personnel carriers, they cannot shoot down MiGs or MI-24 armored attack helicopters. All of the published photographs showing downed Soviet helicopters have been unarmored MI-8s or transport aircraft. I asked people whether they had heard of or seen the Mujahedeen using portable surface-to-air missiles of any sort, such as Egyptian or captured SA-7s but no one had witnessed them or knew of their use.

A question of particular importance concerns the rebels' sources of arms, and in particular the role of outside powers such as Pakistan, Iran, and China as conduits for weapons. Almost all Pakistani officials insisted to me that the bulk of the Mujahedeen's arms came from captured Afghan stockpiles or from Afghan army defectors. This is clearly something of an overstatement. Given the extent of movement across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, the NWFP must be an important source of

arms in the provinces of southern Afghanistan such as Paktia, Ghazni, and Nangahar. In the gunsmith's shop in Darra that I visited, a number of packages of automatic weapons had been bundled up, ready for shipment to Afghanistan. I also heard an account of about 50 jeeps purchased in Pakistan with Iranian money and moved across the border into Afghani Baluchistan. Furthermore, Chinese-manufactured AK-47s have been seen by journalists in the hands of the rebels.

It is probably true that captured arms are the single most important source of weapons for the rebellion as a whole, because most of the fighting has been taking place in Badakhshan, Kunduz, Herat, or in the Hazarajat, which are largely inaccessible from Pakistan, Iran, or China. The Mujahedeen fighting in these areas will have an increasingly difficult time obtaining arms as the rate of defections from the Afghan army tapers off. Those provincial garrisons or supply depots that could be overrun probably have been by now, and there are very few reports of weapons being captured directly from the Soviets.

Mujahedeen tactics have undergone something of an evolution over time. In the early phases of the civil war the tribesmen would mount regular military operations such as planned daylight attacks on garrisons or armored columns. But as the Afghan army and later the Soviets began to protect themselves more effectively and learned to call on airpower for fire support, the Mujahedeen reverted to classical guerrilla tactics--hit-and-run engagements by very small bands of fighters against logistics or supply columns. The greater number of Soviet casualties have probably been incurred among truck drivers. The roads linking Termez and Dushanbe in the Soviet Union to Kabul have been

cut so frequently[2] that the Soviets have had to airlift in food supplies as well as ammunition and petroleum, oil and lubricants.

Casualty estimates on both sides are highly unreliable because information of any sort is difficult to obtain from anywhere but the provinces immediately bordering Pakistan. One Pakistani source put Afghan army casualties at 8,000-10,000, and 5,000 among the Mujahedeen, 2,000 of whom were killed in action (excluding civilians). Estimates of Soviet casualties range from 3,000-15,000. Pakistani intelligence officials admitted that they did not have very good sources of information and that American intelligence, presumably having access to information within the Soviet Union, was more reliable. The casualty statistics published in the western press are generally at the upper end of the Pakistani estimates, one figure cited being 500 per week of which a fifth were killed in action. This number seems highly improbable given the Mujahedeen's lack of firepower and the Soviets' relative invulnerability as a result of their present tactics. The figures being given out by the Afghan rebel groups in Peshawar on which a number of journalists have based their estimates are wildly exaggerated. Most of the photographs displayed of burnt or damaged Soviet equipment comes in fact from the Afghan army, and the losses were incurred for the most part before the Soviet intervention.

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[2] As an example of the vulnerability of Afghanistan's road network, the single Russian-built highway between Mazar-i-Sharif near the Russian border to Kabul runs through a 2.7 kilometer tunnel at the Salang Pass, at a height of 11,000 feet.

V. MUJAHEDDEEN POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The political organization of the Afghan resistance movement will affect the ultimate military success of the war. The most important single fact to be noted about the insurgency is that it is tribally based, such that authority extends downward through what is essentially a large extended family. The bulk of the leadership is drawn from the traditional maliks and sardars, or tribal chiefs, and not from religiously or ideologically based political organizations. This is true despite the well-publicized political activity that occurs among the Afghan exile groups operating out of Peshwar. The prominence that the Peshawar groups have received appears to be more the product of journalistic overemphasis than a reflection of their real importance in Afghanistan.

At least eight Afghan political parties are headquartered in Peshawar at the present time. The Pakistani government has made no effort to restrict their activities and actually pays for the house in which one of the groups is headquartered. (The constant political activity of the Afghans causes a certain amount of resentment among the local Pakistanis, who are totally barred from political activity.) The eight groups are:

1. The National Islamic Revolutionary Front; leader, Sayeed Ahmad Gaylani.
2. The Jamaat-i-Islami; leader, Prof. Burhanidin Rabbani.
3. The Jebhe Milli Nejat, Afghanistan (Afghan National Liberation Front); leader Prof. Siqbatullah Mojadidi.

4. The Hakarat Enkelab Islami (Islamic Revolutionary Movement);  
leader (?)
5. Hezb-i-Islami; leader, Yunis Khalis.
6. Hezb-i-Islami; leader, Gulbudeen Hikmatyar.
7. Afghan Millat (Afghan Social Democratic Party).
8. Loya Jirga; president, Babrak Zai.

There have been numerous attempts made to try to unify these factions, and the first five groups listed did actually agree to cooperate as a unified front in March 1980. This was known as the Ittihad-i-Nejate Islami Afghanistan, or the Islamic Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan, under the leadership of a politically neutral figure named Prof. Sayaf who was brought in from the outside for this purpose. The Islamic Alliance does not include the largest of the Mujahedeen organizations, Gulbudeen's faction of the Hezb-i-Islami. The Loya Jirga represented another attempt to unify the Mujahedeen not only in Peshawar but throughout the whole of Afghanistan as well.[1] Although the promoters of this assembly claimed that delegates appeared from all the provinces in Afghanistan, the Loya Jirga in fact lacked general legitimacy and could not form the basis for unified political action. That group has now descended to the level of one Afghan political party among several.

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[1] "Jirga" is the Pushtu word for "council" or "assembly;" a jirga is routinely held within a particular tribe to determine in a rather democratic fashion matters of common interest to the group. A loya jirga is a convocation of tribes from all over Afghanistan to deliberate on matters of what can be called national interest, such as the selection or ratification of a new king. These are generally held no more than a few times each century. The most recent "loya jirga" was the first to have been held outside of Afghanistan.

As a general rule, most of the Peshawar-based Mujahedeen groups are willing to accept assistance from any outside source they can find. Indeed, a number of them have expressed annoyance at the Ayatollah Khomeini for having diverted the West's attention away from the plight of the Afghans. Gulbudeen's faction of the Hezb-i-Islami, however, has received much of its inspiration from the Iranian revolution and is consequently very anti-Western. Gulbudeen refuses to accept support from the United States or from Egypt because of the Camp David accords and is reportedly financed by a number of fundamentalist Muslim groups such as the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan and the Ikhwan-i-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) in the Arab world.

Unfortunately, the Peshawar-based Mujahedeen groups do not represent more than a very small fraction of the rebels actually fighting in Afghanistan. According to one Afghan exile source, all the Peshawar-based groups together do not control more than 2,000 Mujahedeen actually fighting in Afghanistan, all of them located in the provinces bordering Pakistan. By contrast, there are perhaps 90,000 men under the control of the tribal leaders in the Hazarajat alone. Some of the most bitter combat has occurred in the Tazhik areas around Herat, which have on several occasions been "liberated," as well as along the Russian border in Kunduz and Badakhshan. None of the Peshawar-based groups has any influence in these areas or makes a contribution to the fighting there. There are accounts of Hazaras from central Afghanistan who have walked all the way to the tribal territories in Pakistan in search of food and ammunition. They are extremely bitter and resentful of the Peshawar groups, which have been monopolizing all the publicity from



their sanctuaries in Pakistan, while their own people have been fighting and dying.

The Peshawar-based groups have proliferated largely on account of the personal ambitions of their leaders, who have their eye on coming to power once the Communists are driven out of Afghanistan by tribal forces inside the country. They tend to be more interested in their power position than in contributing to the success of the insurgency as a whole. Like some of the Fedayeen factions within the Palestinian movement, many of the Mujahedeen groups are the creation of outside forces, such as the Jamaat-i-Islami or the Ikhwan, each of which is seeking its own candidate in the event of a later power struggle. As such they are not reliable channels for arms and money going into Afghanistan, because a good deal of their resources and effort are put into undercutting their rivals. In one instance Gulbuddeen's group was said to have shot some 30 defecting Afghan army soldiers in order to prevent their arms from going to one of the other factions.[2] All of the groups compete in trying to register the Afghan refugees into their own factions, often coercively.

The lack of unity within the resistance movement dissipates its energy and will probably prevent it from scoring any major military successes. In present circumstances, for example, one cannot imagine the Mujahedeen carrying off anything remotely resembling the Tet

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[2] One journalist who had recently completed his fourth journey into Afghanistan reported an incident indicative of the relations between the various Mujahedeen groups. While travelling on a mission with one of the factions, his companions suddenly grew tense and cocked their weapons. He asked whether there were Russians ahead. No, he was told, it was the Hezb-i-Islami. The two groups passed each other in the mountains with averted eyes.

Offensive. Serious political problems would arise were the Soviets to decide at some point to withdraw and leave a power vacuum in the center. The tribes might decide to convene a genuine loya jirga at this point, but political developments over the past decade would probably act to disrupt the consensus around such an institution.

Islam does provide a unifying force that both provides a vehicle for and intensifies the underlying nationalism of the insurgency. It is significant that two leaders of the major Mujahedeen groups, Mojadidi and Rabbani, both have theological backgrounds and were well-known religious figures in pre-1978 Afghanistan. All of the other factions, with the exception of the Afghan Millat (Afghan Social Democrat) and certain far-left Maoist splinter groups, proclaim an Islamic ideology. The heightened religious consciousness throughout the Islamic world in the past decade is a significant antidote to the traditional fickleness of tribal political alignments. Furthermore, the existing degree of disunity is not a particular obstacle to the continuation of the low-level guerrilla activity that has taken place up to this point. Indeed, the decentralized nature of the leadership renders it invulnerable to certain kinds of disruption.

Although the bulk of the insurgency remains tribal, it has spread to the cities as well where it has begun to erode the Soviets' already narrow political base in a serious fashion. City dwellers are traditionally looked down upon by the tribesmen as soft and not willing to fight for their independence. To the extent that the Soviets have found loyal Afghans, they have been drawn from the cities; the bulk of the PDPA membership consists of such urban types as schoolteachers,

bureaucrats, army officers, and factory workers. In addition, the cities provide the majority of nonpolitical administrators who have collaborated with the party in running the governmental machinery.

But in February a turning point of sorts in the mobilization of the urban population was reached when Kabul was closed down for several days as a result of a general strike. Urban protests broke out again in late April, in the wake of the government's celebration of the second anniversary of the April 1978 revolution. The demonstrations culminated in a march by several hundred teenaged high school girls, who taunted Afghan soldiers for working with the Soviets. The troops declared a curfew and fired on the demonstrators, killing several scores of youngsters. There was a wave of assassinations of Soviets and loyal Afghans in Kabul, and a number of underground political parties were formed comparable to the ones in Peshawar.

Concurrent with this overt political activity and no less important has been the steady erosion of competent and loyal Afghans to staff the administrative bureaucracies. Afghanistan's technocratic base has always been small because of its underdevelopment. The problem became even worse after April 1978 when most top officials for political reasons had to be drawn from the ranks of the Khalq faction of the PDPA. The pool declined further as a result of the vicious purges arising out of subsequent phases of the Khalq-Percham rivalry. The Soviet intervention and Moscow's installation of Babrak Karmal last December demoralized a good many hardcore PDPA militants, who for all of their sympathy for the Soviet Union retained some nationalist feelings. There are persistent rumors floating around Kabul to the effect that even

Babrak Karmal has been contemplating suicide for his role in the intervention and that he has been disowned by his own father. The brutality of the various PDPA regimes undercut the the Communists' reformist pretensions, and the issue of collaboration with the Russians came to predominate over ideological ones.

## VI. SOVIET OPTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

The war in Afghanistan is currently stalemated. On the one hand, Moscow has not been able to break the back of the resistance. The Soviet intervention force has not succeeded in pacifying any more of the countryside than had been under government control in December 1979, and the Communists' position in the cities has eroded steadily. As one American observer with considerable experience in South Vietnam noted, the Soviet position in Afghanistan is in certain respects worse than that of the United States in Vietnam. By the evaluation system devised in the early 1970s in connection with the pacification program, the Russians have no A hamlets, or even B hamlets; they would not be able to leave behind them anything remotely like the million man South Vietnamese army that the United States set up upon its withdrawal. At present troop levels, there appears to be very little the Russians can do to physically destroy the Mujahedeen. On the other hand, there is little prospect that the Afghan resistance will be able to force the Soviets out of the country, or even to raise the cost of the occupation substantially. The movement lacks either a unified political leadership or a material base of support.

At present, the Soviets face three broad policy choices. They can withdraw from Afghanistan, promptly or in phases; they can attempt to break the current stalemate through a sharply increased military commitment; or they can hang on to the cities with roughly the troop strength currently deployed, making no serious effort to pacify the countryside.

The first of these options would cut Soviet losses and extricate Moscow from an embarrassing situation before withdrawal proved even more difficult. The various European proposals for negotiations on the "neutralization" of Afghanistan are all premised on the hope that the Russians have already realized that their intervention was a bad mistake and are now seeking a face-saving means of covering their partial or complete withdrawal. By this view, the Russians would accept some sort of coalition government provided it undertook to guarantee certain fundamental Soviet defensive interests, such as nonalignment with the West.

Although such a view of Soviet intentions serves European purposes, it both overestimates the cost of the intervention to date and underestimates the problems involved in a withdrawal from a Soviet point of view. Moscow's international prestige, particularly in the Muslim world, has clearly been damaged by invasion, and the Soviets have been hurt by the grain embargo and Olympic boycott. But these are largely sunk costs that cannot be recovered through a withdrawal; indeed, Moscow must fear incurring a reputation for weakness in such circumstances. In the meantime, what might be labelled the "operating costs" of the intervention are not high: Aside from tying down ten divisions, the level of casualties and equipment losses is controllable and within the range experienced in other Third World operations. The Soviets have shown willingness to support expensive and protracted counterinsurgency campaigns in both Angola and Ethiopia and have borne a heavy economic burden in Cuba for nearly two decades.

The consequences of a withdrawal would be dramatic. Moscow cannot leave behind a political structure that will safeguard its interests, however minimally, at any time in the foreseeable future. The PDPA is weaker now than it was before the December 1979 intervention and would probably be swept away shortly after a Soviet withdrawal. No opposition groups are willing to contemplate forming a coalition with the Communists, and any non-Communist successor regime would inevitably be hostile to the Soviet Union. An international peacekeeping force, Islamic or otherwise, could no more guarantee or influence the character of such a regime than could the Russians, given the independent and intractable nature of the Afghans.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether Moscow's intervention arose out of purely defensive motives in the first place, and that the Soviets would be willing to give up the clearcut strategic advantages toward the Persian Gulf conferred on them by their invasion. However uncomfortable Moscow's present position may be, it is difficult to see how the costs of hanging on could outweigh the problems of accepting what would inevitably amount to a total defeat if Soviet forces withdrew.

If the Soviets were to break the existing stalemate, they would face both a military and a political problem. In military terms, Moscow has a choice of trying to destroy the Mujahedeen themselves, cutting off their sources of weapons, or denying them food. These alternatives are of course not mutually exclusive and have all three have been pursued to some degree already.

The Russians could attempt a serious search-and-destroy campaign against the tribesmen, but it would be rather difficult as the target

system is very well hidden and dispersed. Many observers have assumed that if the Soviets are ruthless enough this can be achieved, either through indiscriminate aerial bombardment or the use of chemical agents. This may be so, but one should not underestimate the magnitude of the effort involved. Simply acquiring tactical intelligence on the location of the Mujahedeen in the mountains and flushing them out will require Soviet infantry to operate dismounted, necessitating higher troop levels and greater casualties.

The Soviets could try to deny the tribesmen weapons by systematically interdicting the infiltration routes from Pakistan. The very primitiveness of the weapons involved makes them very hard to target, however. Vehicles or large systems, such as SAMs, would have to be brought through one of the half dozen or so major passes in the NWFP. These could be interdicted by air day or night, probably with much greater ease than on the Ho Chi Minh trail because of the lack of vegetation and the narrowness of the mountain defiles. But it is a much greater problem to stop the infiltration of small arms and man-portable ATGMs by individual Mujahedeen. There are hundreds of mountain trails and tracks going across the border that are used regularly in the migrations of nomads known as powindahs and by the trans-Durand tribes. The vast majority of the trails cannot be located by air and must therefore be closed off on the ground. On the Afghan side of the Durand Line there is no infrastructure that could support Soviet mechanized infantry; it would have to be built under wartime conditions and manned rather heavily. Moreover, a Soviet attack across the Pakistani border would create serious international problems for Moscow. The United



States signed an executive agreement with Pakistan in 1959, pledging to come to Pakistan's assistance in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union. Although the American commitment to Pakistan has recently been less than firm, Moscow would run the risk of open confrontation with the United States.

It is not clear how important Pakistan is as a source of weapons to the course of the war. Even a successful effort to seal off the border would affect the insurgency only in the southernmost provinces and would not address the difficulties the Soviets are facing in the Hazarajat and in the north. A more effective policy might be to impose greater control over the Afghan army and to replace it with Soviet troops where possible. Such a policy would of course go counter to any attempt to "Afghanize" the conflict, and would require once again a large commitment of manpower.

The third military alternative is to deny the Mujahedeen food by following a scorched-earth policy. Much of Afghanistan's agricultural production has already been disrupted as an indirect result of the war, and there is some evidence that the Russians have begun to go after crops deliberately. Much of the wheat for the major Afghan cities now has to be trucked or airlifted into the country from the Soviet Union, and there are stories of Russian soldiers selling ammunition for food. If the Soviets want to systematically destroy Afghan agriculture, there is obviously much that they can do, depending on how ruthless they are willing to be. Once again, however, the Afghans are to some extent protected by their own primitiveness. Afghan agriculture is highly decentralized and for the most part does not depend on such things as

irrigation, seasonal labor, the availability of fertilizers, and farmers' cooperatives. The Mujahedeen, moreover, are very tough people and are used to living on very little. Unlike Vietnamese peasants, they are not tied down by tradition to particular family plots; many routinely move around in search of food.

Moscow's problem is of course ultimately political: It must win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, demoralize the opposition, and find collaborators in its project to build a Red Afghanistan. The Soviets have already taken steps to try to appease their enemies. In the late summer of 1979, even before the intervention, the Soviets tried to soften the face of the Khalqi regime in Kabul by seeking non-Communist coalition partners for it. There were rumors at the time that the Russians had even approached Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, who at the time was living in exile in London.[1]

One of the major points of contention between the Soviets and Hafizullah Amin in the last half of 1979 was probably Soviet insistence on a more moderate program of social reform and various conciliatory gestures toward domestic public opinion. The intervention and the forcible replacement of Amin with Babrak Karmal was intended, however clumsily, as an effort to placate the opposition: Hence the prolonged denunciation of Amin as a CIA agent, the releasing of a number of political prisoners, and the changing of the former bright red Afghan flag to one that had a stripe of Islamic green.

The gambit failed miserably and the Soviets' political base has shrunk rather than expanded. The Soviets can deal with this problem in

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[1] New York Times, August 2, 1979.

one of two ways. The first is to revitalize the PDPA and create a sizable vanguard of ideologically motivated party cadres who will remain loyal to the Soviet Union. According to Pakistani sources about 3,000 young Perchami workers are being trained at present in the Soviet Union, out of a core of party militants that could not exceed 10-15,000. This is the civilian-bureaucratic counterpart to the restructuring of the Afghan army described earlier. The hope is not to coopt existing political forces in Afghanistan, which have proven hopelessly recalcitrant, but to create a new Afghan man, so to speak, from the ground up.

The other solution is to take over the administration of the country directly and run it like a Soviet Central Asian republic. This process began shortly after the April 1978 coup, when large numbers of Soviet-bloc technicians (including a good many Central Asians) were brought into Afghanistan to help administer the Khalqi reform program. At present the East Germans now run Afghanistan's state security service, while the Russians have completely taken over the economic, planning, budget, and interior ministries. This process is bound to continue if the Soviets want to consolidate their hold over the country, because of further demoralization and defections among the Afghan civil service and intra-PDPA purges. The Soviet commitment to Afghanistan will therefore not be limited to the military, but will necessarily involve growing numbers of civilian administrators.

The final option is to simply declare that the war has been won and to accept an indefinite prolongation of the status quo--no victory and no defeat. In fact, this strategy is consistent with a slight reduction

in Soviet troop levels to the minimum required to keep order in the cities and for self-defense. Brezhnev's mid-June 1980 announcement of a partial withdrawal indicates that Moscow has chosen this course over the short run. A freeze in the current level of deployments suits Soviet interests. The Soviets wanted to undercut the American-sponsored boycott of the Olympic Games and to restore good relations with a number of key Western European states. The disunity in the Atlantic Alliance in the aftermath of the intervention and the eagerness of Giscard and Schmidt to visit Moscow indicated a clear opportunity to do so. The Soviets may feel that the West is passing through a delicate period at the moment as it decides collectively how to accommodate itself to the reality of increased Soviet power, and cannot be forced to swallow Russian gains too quickly.

The real question, then, is whether the Soviets will continue to accept the present ambiguous situation indefinitely, or seek to break the stalemate militarily at some future date, whenever the initial furor appears to have died down. There is no particular reason to believe that the Russians themselves have made up their minds. They obviously did not decide to invade Afghanistan in the expectation that it would lead to the results obtained, and they may need some time to adjust their objectives.

At least two factors suggest that Moscow will choose the option of maintaining the status quo rather than escalating. The first is the Soviet sensitivity to casualties, as evidenced by the tactics they have used to date. A full scale pacification effort would require two, three, perhaps four times as many troops as are now in Afghanistan; more

important, it would require a change in their mode of operations that would expose them to greater losses. The second factor has to do with the greater tolerance a totalitarian regime has for ambiguous or inconclusive foreign policy situations. There is no domestic pressure in the Soviet Union urging a quick and neat resolution to the war in Afghanistan, and no national tradition, as in the United States, of an all-or-nothing commitment to victory. Such considerations, combined with a reluctance to tie down several hundred thousand men in Asia when other opportunities and dangers are evident, may militate against a larger Soviet presence on the ground.

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